

TRAVELLING THE SIDEWALKS

by Mariane Pearl



MARTIN DE LA SERNA

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Time Warner Women award, The White House project award, the Internews award for excellence in international reporting, the Vital Voices award, The Indian Express Excellence in Journalism award, the *El Mundo* editorial award in Spain, and the Prix Vérité in France for excellence in non-fiction writing.

Ghana.

There is a French song I loved when I was a teenager named 'To be Born Somewhere'. It talks about how you don't get to select the asphalt or dirt roads on which you'll learn how to walk. Maxime Le Forestier wrote the song in 1981, when Charles Pasqua, then-French Interior Minister, aggressively imposed anti-

immigration laws in the country.

The lyrics involve all people who leave their homeland to make a living abroad for their families. But there is another song to be written, one that has been a long time coming – you don't choose your sex, either. If you are born female, this can quickly become a web of twisted back alleys on all

the wrong sidewalks of this planet. From wars to poverty, women and children suffer more, always. "It is more dangerous today to be a woman in a war zone than a soldier," said Major General Patrick Cammaert, the Deputy Force Commander of the United Nations Mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in 2008.

When rape is used as a weapon of war, women are enslaved and described as sperm 'envelopes' to be passed from man to man: violent forced impregnation, psychological terror, humiliation, bodily mutilation and death are their fate. In 2011, a study from the *American Journal of Public Health* revealed that 48 women were raped every hour in the DRC.

I first started corresponding with Rose in 2013. She wrote saying that she initially helped people living with HIV but that the rape epidemic was so bad in North Kivu, DRC, where she lives, that she went "where the sufferings of the Congolese women" are. She had a great project: "I will bring together 30 women from the Great Lakes region in the city of Kigali to speak out and to put in place a network of women journalists for Peace, Democracy and Justice," she said in an email. Then I don't hear from her and the chilling silence is broken when an email appears after three months:

"I'm OK. Yes I didn't write you because during 3 months we didn't have any internet connection. M23, a rebellion in North Kivu cut our internet connection. We accessed yesterday.

*I shall write to you very soon
Rose"*

And again, I don't hear from her and, each time, I feel so close and so far away from this woman I have yet to meet. To me, Rose is a shining example of what the world needs most. Someone who witnesses an epidemic of arbitrary and

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strategic rapes and reacts by upholding what she feels are the most important values: peace, democracy and justice (as well as journalism). Not revenge, not a word of anger or hatred against men as perpetrators in her correspondence. Only compassion, a commanding driving force that comes through in the urgent tone of her writing and that iron determination. I say, top that. I say, may our world leaders be inspired.

It makes sense that people like Rose, who can think their way through a complex web of politics, culture, traditions, family honour and the likes, would be the most qualified to build a tangible path towards peace. And, like most women and girls I have met, I don't believe Rose wants to be at odds with the men in her life. She wants to find a solution but her answers embrace everyone while bringing those who deserve it to justice. I am lucky to have met many women of that calibre, and each of them has helped forge my belief that the rise of such people is the most reliable source of hope today.

In search of hope

It was hope I was looking for when I started with my special interest in 'women's issues' in 2007. I quickly found out: women's issues are really a single men's issue, an inability to let go

of power. After the 9/11 attacks, hope seemed to be the most needed ingredient to survive the tragedy. I learned that more than a hundred babies had been born from fathers who had died in the towers. So I decided to go in search of a tangible hope for these babies and their mothers. Not a hypothetical one, not merely a spiritual one either. My instincts made me turn towards the half of the world we don't hear much about or from – women and girls.

During the following years, I met women and girls from the world over and learned about what they are subjected to as females. As the 2014 'State of the World's Girls' report says: "Within the first seven years of life, girls are already indoctrinated into the idea of being subject to men. This starts in the household and is reinforced in the community."¹

From honour killings to sex trafficking, breast ironing, female genital mutilation, acid attacks to early marriages. From forced illiteracy or rape as a weapon of war to the silent killer: domestic violence. If the list is endless, the means is always the same: violence. The narrative seems to involve an obsession about policing the woman's body. Whatever the justification, the will to dominate is the common thread.

I went to 18 countries to profile many different women and today, since I started working as Managing Editor of the Chime for Change's storytelling platform, I have been lucky to provide a place for their stories. Mostly first-person accounts that, I hope, create a patchwork of voices from women and girls singing a different song. People



ESPER RASMUSSEN/PANOS PICTURES

Wounded refugee in hospital, Democratic Republic of Congo.

who have been through a lot and have become beacons of wisdom. Feeble flickers sparking everywhere, hoping that lighting the way for themselves will allow them to illuminate others. I have now read, seen and heard hundreds of stories of women and girls and I have never failed to find a will to seek change, at often high personal costs, for the sake of others. The feel, the context, the climate may be different for each person, but the will to work together and help one another are like blood, of the same colour.

Telling the stories

Bonding through our stories is crucial because it can create a global dialogue in which each voice matters, as opposed to the

cacophony of opinions we tend to replace them with. Connecting the dots between your life and that of others is what women and girls do well.

There is an example that always stayed with me because it allowed me to understand people I had lived with as a child. Amina was made to leave Morocco for Paris, to jump sidewalks, so to speak. Just like those silent ladies who populated my childhood and whose life always felt as if something had been cut short in them. Amina lives in the suburbs of Paris. As a child, she had loved Victor Hugo, a lone anthology in Arabic on her parents' bookshelves. I knew exactly what she meant, as he has been my

favourite author since I was 12. I refer to him as VH. I understood why she had fallen for this beautifully crafted account of the human condition. I understood the call for everything noble his writings induced. At about that same age, 12, Amina was married to a man emigrating to France as a way of securing income for his relatives. She was told that school was over and once in France she started working as a cleaning lady. Years passed, she divorced; she cleaned and raised her two daughters alone. But every night, she would come home and write phonetic poems to the moon you could catch a glimpse of through the tiny windows of her modest flat.

After many years of cleaning, she had an accident at work and met an Arabic-speaking psychologist who helped her transcribe the poems in French. Amina went to a publishers' fair. The book, *A Prayer to the Moon*, was greatly acclaimed and offers of translations came in. She had become the voice of thousands of women all over Europe, who, like her, felt 'transparent', a commodity, a household good, not a human. They stepped out of the shadows of their servitude and claimed respect and recognition.

Amina gained her freedom. She told me she hadn't had a choice in more years than she could remember, ever since she was married off to someone going to France. And her youngest daughter told me how pride ran through her veins when at the beginning of school, under mother's profession she switched from 'Cleaning Lady' to 'Writer'. I wish I could tell VH that story.

Now is the right time to help women and girls share their side of the story. Now is the first time in history, after countless wars and cycles of civilisation, that this 'human capital' is potentially blooming. In early March this year, I went to Iraq to deliver a storytelling workshop for young refugees who fled ISIS in Kurdistan. At first shocked and silent, in the days that followed the girls began to speak. One participant, a beautiful young woman named Sham, chose to talk about her great aunt. "People say that she was as brave as a man because they couldn't fathom women's strength. In fact, it should be as brave as a woman,"

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she said to me, laughing. She showed me the photograph of a strong older woman, dressed in a traditional Yazidi outfit standing among men in the dry mountains, with a Kalashnikov strapped to her shoulder and a cigarette burning her fingers.

Standing up and speaking out

The changes that are under way are indeed unprecedented as women and girls claim their rights to their lives, their bodies and their story. It is Mercy in Malawi who decides to do her coming-out publicly by going to the national newspaper and giving them a front page story: "I am a Lesbian" spread across Page One of the *Malawi News* the next day.

Mercy was exorcised, thrown out of her house and shamed by all. Yet she withstood the storm, because of her profound belief in her right to choose her sexuality. And no one had ever done this before in this deeply homophobic country. It is Nujood in Yemen who, at 10 years old, obtains a divorce – breaking the timeless tribal tradition. It is Malala, it is Mayerli in Colombia who, at 15, after seeing her best friend

shot in front of her, created a children's think tank to stop violence.

Fear of the drug cartels, the level of corruption, the rampant impunity, drugs and alcohol made for resignation and the trivialisation of brutality. So the children gathered in a sand pit and came to the understanding that violence started at home. They decided to work on their parents and the community, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding. They became the first group of children to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. These unsung heroes light the way for millions of others, armed with an unconditional belief in the right of humans to live as such. In the case of Mayerli, they were youngsters who strove to bend their stories in a radically new direction, their crystalline voices breaking the eerie silence of hundreds of thousands muted by violence.

Until now, women have left very little mark on Big History, considering they are half of humanity. They were half of the Second World War and half of every struggle and conflict that has scarred our world since then. They were the other halves; trapped in the 'private sphere', carefully kept away from public life and power.

To the world they were victims who screamed and cried, but you don't get to hear what they really had to say. Yet we know that female potential is the most untapped the world has ever had because we keep studying it.

Women at so-called grassroot levels, but really most ordinary women, have proven they perform economically and



PLAN INTERNATIONAL/ERIK THALLAUG

Malala Yousafzai addresses audiences at the Nobel Peace Prize celebration.

reinvest in their communities. Often in quiet determination through everyday acts, we can see women and girls have developed the courage to give education the place it deserves for the survival of our troubled world. When I went to Liberia and talked to women there at the market, they told me they didn't vote for President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf because she was a woman, but because she believed in education.

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power," said President Lincoln. We could give all women a try too.

Power, it seems, is the ultimate lure; few can resist it, or renounce it, or share it. From my experience, it seems like greatness ceases where the ego starts; couple that with greed and you get instant corruption and violation of basic human rights. I don't believe women are immune to these traps of greed and egoism, but I do believe they are better equipped to deal with them. Probably because they have suffered and witnessed what power can do to people, because they understand that power is a dangerous and delicate instrument that requires

outstanding moral courage, such as Rose displayed in her short but intense messages. Clearly, violence is not inflicted by men and boys only. Women and girls who have suffered abuse tend to inflict it. But more women will fight to the end for their child to have a different life. Power seeks to control what it fears most. And if we consider how many women are being physically and emotionally hurt solely on the ground of their gender, there is a great deal of fear. Again, it is only through connections with my own life that I was able to fathom what the numbers meant.

A girl's life

I did my pregnancy test in the Karachi airport toilets. It was 12 September 2001, one day after the attacks on the twin towers in NYC, and as journalists my husband and I were sent straight to neighbouring Pakistan from India where we were based. We were scared and deeply happy. To me, giving life is the most generous thing I have ever done; the idea of giving life to someone to fulfil my own needs doesn't make sense. I also didn't have strong feelings about gender and the idea that my child was being born for economic reasons was not among the complex web of emotions that come with giving birth.

I learned that welcoming a little girl in the world was a luxury when, a few weeks later, my husband and I went for a routine sonogram at a Mumbai clinic. As we opened the door, both pretty convinced we had a girl, we were greeted by rows of posters advertising gender selection. In the waiting room I chatted with women who admitted their desire to abort. My anger and judgmental reaction faded as I listened to these mothers, their thin faces reflecting powerlessness and resignation. The new life they were carrying was also their loss. Two of them said they would have kept the baby but societal pressure and family disdain got the better of them. Also, they didn't wish a girl's life upon their children. They said this so shyly, a smile to cover their pain and a hand to cover their smile. And if you looked even more closely, you could see the little girls in them. Little girls with very little childhood as they all had been

married early and for the purpose of carrying sons.

I went home and there was Dalia. She was five and literally lived on the sidewalk outside my building. Every day she waited all day for me to come home. For the first few weeks, she would just grin at me, hiding behind her father. She was little enough that she was allowed to approach me and I would carry her and give her kisses. But that was the extent of what I could do. My building was a Jain residence. When we moved in, we were told that no meat could enter the facilities. If insects were found we were asked to kindly give them back to nature, including roaches. Our neighbours would walk barefoot so as to not step on an ant and didn't eat vegetables that have roots like carrots. This intense respect for life contrasted violently with stepping out of our building and seeing little Dalia, exhausted and dirty, sleeping on her bedding of concrete, and dirt, rats, crows and crowds, her thumb loosely hanging from her mouth. During that year, the news came four times of an oven that had exploded, burning to death a wife. Everyone shrugged; "dowry killing," they said – as if there were nothing more to add.

This was an ordinary year, telling the stories of what it

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means to be a woman or a girl in many parts of the world.

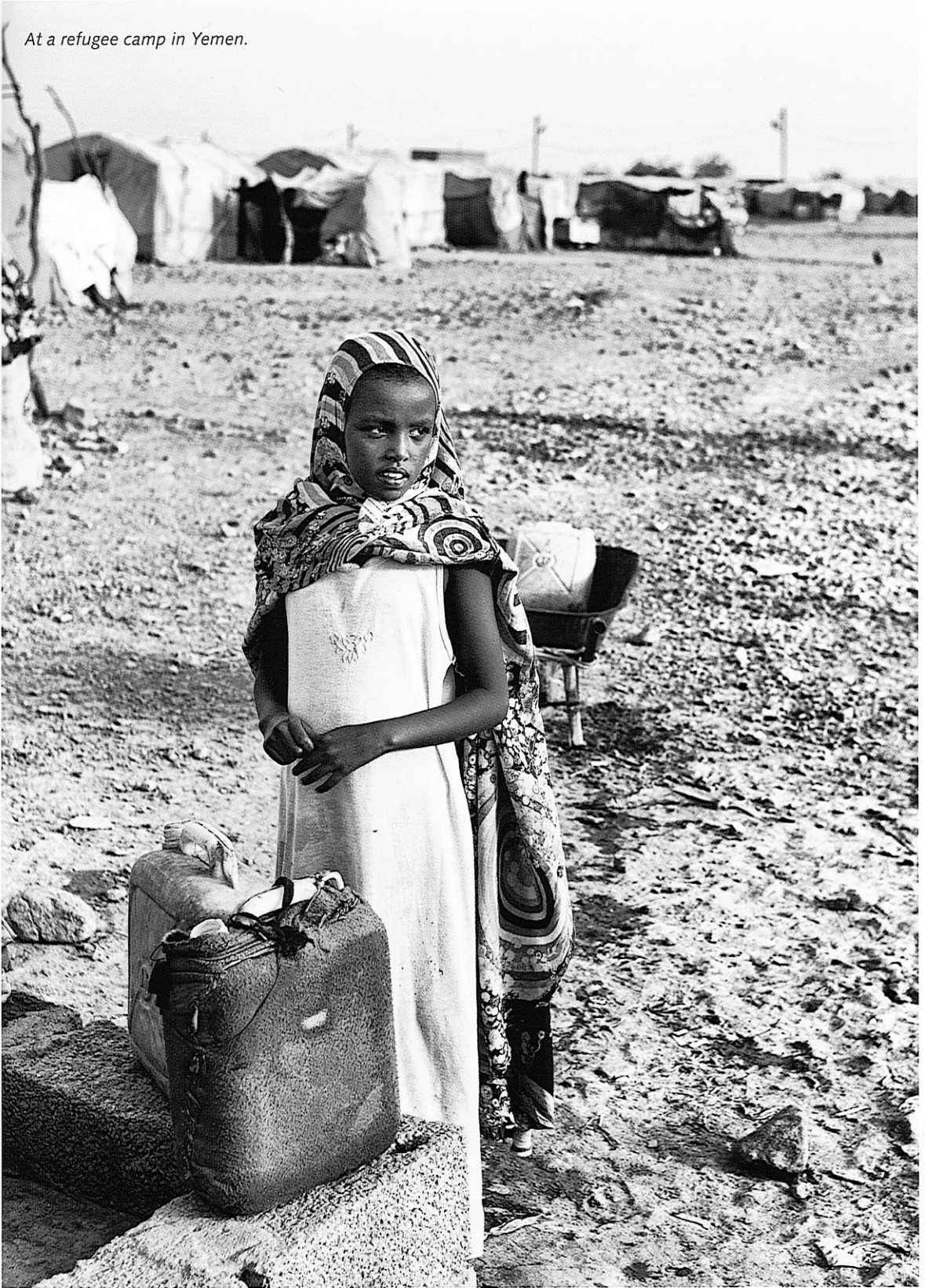
Breaking the chains

But today, for the first time, we start having a glimpse into these unknown powerful women in the trenches – in Guatemala, the US or the DRC – who by their actions restore everyone's dignity. They care for all; revenge isn't a strong enough motive but the lives of their children are. I have met women and girls who feel that for the first time, life could change and an unstoppable wave of people will declare: "life cannot go on like this." As slavery was once abolished, women can no longer be treated as second-class citizens, burdened by violence and manipulated by shame. On 18 March this year, I attended the Freedom of Expression award in London. One of the winners, Amran Bundi, is the founder of Frontier Indigenous Network, an NGO to help women at the dicey Somalia-Kenya border.

In her acceptance speech, she dedicated the award to women there, to the victims of terrorism and thugs and sexual violence. She closed by mentioning those who have vilified her, those who have tried to stop her, have abused her and tried to shame her into giving up. "This award also goes to them," she said, radiant under her blue headscarf.

Today, if the world would only agree, we have the opportunity for this spirit to expand, to see girls and women break their chains link by link; to create a vast network of people believing in peace and equality, knowing full well what it really takes. And what we could achieve. 🌍

At a refugee camp in Yemen.



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